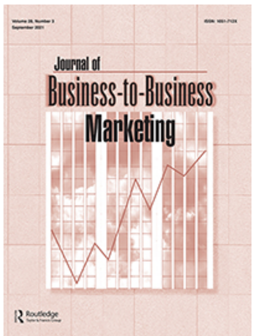

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Brand Identity-image Congruence: A Framework for Business-to-business Banks in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: A fundamental element of brand-building is communicating what a brand is and what it stands for. Clarifying a brand's identity may yield sustained competitive advantage. Moreover, aligning a brand's identity to its image is vital in business-to-business (B2B) services, where a firm's actual character and performance serve as critical sources of differentiation. This study proposes a comprehensive Brand Identity-Image Congruence (BI-IC) framework for B2B banks within South Africa.

Methodology: An interpretivist qualitative research design was adopted. The BI-IC framework was derived from an empirical exploration of the applicability of the Brand Identity Prism (BIP) in selected B2B banks. To explore the applicability of the BIP dimensions, depth interviews were conducted with bank marketing executives who were instrumental in brand strategy formulation.

Findings: The findings revealed that some BIP dimensions (*physique, personality, culture* and *relationships*) were applicable to the study context, while *reflection* and *self-image* were inapplicable in the same sector. Consequently, an amended version of the BIP is submitted in the form of a BI-IC conceptual framework for B2B banks.

Originality/value: This study contributes to two areas of the brand identity school: (i) it empirically explored the applicability of the BIP in a new context; and (ii) the BI-IC framework is the first of its kind as there is no universally accepted B2B bank Brand Identity-Image Congruence framework. Therefore, this study makes a unique contribution to brand management literature.

KEYWORDS
Brand management; brand identity; brand identity prism; services; banking

Introduction

Branding is seen as the foundation of a broader marketing strategy (Zhao, Calantone, and Voorhees 2018) and has evolved into a global, strategic and multidisciplinary phenomenon that facilitates brand-customer relationships. Brands and branding have been widely debated by academics and practitioners and thus their definitions are nuanced (Bravo et al. 2017). Kamboj et al. (2018) distinguish between brands and branding insofar as the former reflect views that reside in consumers' minds while the latter is seen as a firm-based practice and a process. Brand identity and brand image schools of thought emanate from this background. The two domains are often used interchangeably, even though their existence is sequential. Brand identity is internally constructed (firm-based) and seeks to clarify what a brand stands for. In contrast, brand image is an external view of brand identity (Kapferer 2001; Muhonen, Hirvonen, and Laukkanen 2017).

Brand identity creation is a topical subject in extant branding theory (Black and Veloutsou 2017; Satini et al. 2018) and aligning it to image is critical in building coherent and consistent brand perspectives between firms and clients (Anisimova 2009). A distinctive and cohesive brand identity is an asset to firms as it yields client preference, trust and loyalty (Coleman, De Chernatony, and Christodoulides 2015). Extant brand identity theory is based on various frameworks. However, these frameworks are largely conceptual due to limited empirical testing, particularly in the B2B services sectors, hence their robustness is questionable (Pareek 2015).

The research problem of this study focuses on Kapferer's (2012) Brand Identity Prism (BIP). The BIP approaches brand identity from an 'inside-out' brand-building perspective, and thus recognizes brand physique, personality, culture, relationships, reflection and self-image as important brand

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identity elements (Kapferer 2001, 2012, 158–63). At present, it is not known whether these elements are relevant and applicable to B2B services. This research gap is addressed in the study by determining which of these BIP elements are applicable to selected South African B2B banks. The study also identifies additional elements to constitute a congruence framework for the banks. This is achieved through a dialectical review of extant brand identity models. The results of this investigation have led to a new addition to theory – the Brand Identity-Image Congruence (BI-IC) framework – an amendment of the BIP. Thus, B2B bank services brand identity literature will be enhanced as the framework is adapted for this context (Steenkamp et al. 2020).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: brand-building is discussed next, whereafter brand identity and brand image are situated within the broader brand management discourse. Services branding is then considered, followed by B2B banks' branding, and an overview of the South African banking sector, the context of the current study. The methodological approach is then described, followed by primary data presentation and analysis. The article concludes by elucidating the theoretical implications of the new BI-IC framework, followed by business marketing practical implications and future research suggestions.

Brand-building

Primarily branding serves two fundamental purposes – brand differentiation and brand identification (Hunt 2018; Moore and Reid 2008). Branding can therefore be viewed from two sequential and interrelated viewpoints. Firms need to differentiate themselves from competitors while consumers need to identify brands to satisfy their needs and wants (Keller 2013; Keller and Swaminathan 2020). As a result, brand orientation and market orientation practices emerged, synchronized with brand differentiation and identification.

Brand orientation is an organizational ethos whereby all business processes are tailored toward the creation, development and nurturing of a brand to differentiate the organization from its competitors (Urde 1999). Market orientation, on the other hand, stems from client-centric business practices where customer needs and wants inform strategy (Muhonen, Hirvonen, and Laukkanen 2017; Urde and Koch 2014). Essentially, brand orientation is an inside-out brand-building approach, where the needs and wants of customers and other stakeholders are considered within the confines of a firm's identity. In contrast, market orientation is an outside-in approach, where the firm responds to needs as dictated by the market (Ind and Bjerke 2007). These two different angles are congruent with the brand identity and brand image schools of thought which concern the current article. Brand identity and brand image are two different but related constructs. The former concerns companies' brand message, whereas the latter relates to what consumers think and feel about the brand message (Alvarado-Karste and Guzman 2020, 972). Therefore, explicating brand identity and brand image concepts and their relationship is critical in strategic brand management (Chung and Byrom 2021).

Brand identity

Brand identity theory suggests that societal responses on potential or actual brand association influences consumers' brand preference. Hence, consumers may select brands with consistent or acceptable identities in their social settings (Ewing and Allen 2017). Therefore, identity-based brand consumption can be confirmed when congruence is reached between consumer's brand preference and societal acceptance (Confente and Kucharska 2021). Nonetheless, brand identity theory is multidimensional, stemming from the contributions of numerous authors (Aaker 1996; De Chernatony 2007; Balmer 2012; Coleman, De Chernatony, and Christodoulides 2011; Kapferer 2012; Keller 2013; Urde 2016; Abratt and Mingione 2017; Burmann, et al. 2017; Beverland 2018; Schmidt and Redler 2018). Keller and Swaminathan (2020) posit that brand identity is formulated by elements such as logos, slogan and signage. The consistency of these elements establishes the cohesiveness of a brand identity (Keller 2013). As a result, identity-driven brand-building originates from within a firm's culture, values and vision (Hatch and Schultz 2001; Heine et al. 2018). The basis of this school of thought is creating an organizational culture to develop and communicate a single, coherent brand identity to all stakeholders (Beverland 2018).

Chung and Byrom (2021) make a similar observation, stating that brand identity formulation is multipronged, based on three principal elements, namely strategic, sensory and organizational identity. Strategic identity is the initial phase of brand-building to clarify a brand's vision, mission, values and intent. Sensory identity incorporates visual elements (color, logo, symbol); auditory elements or jingles/sounds/music that reinforce a brand. Organizational identity is developed through behavior and social interaction among members of an organization (Iglesias et al. 2020). Furthermore, Erjansola et al. (2021) postulate that there should be congruence between sensory or visual identity and organizational identity as the two may have a reciprocal relationship. This link is particularly critical in values-driven service sectors. Core values are central in brand identity construction and they often stem from a brand's origin.

Furthermore, a study that was conducted by Kara et al. (2020) suggests that brand anthropomorphism is a critical dimension in identity-based brand building. The authors argue that identity-based brand building is two-pronged, based on (i) "the self is the hero"; or (ii) "the brand is the hero." In the former perspective, consumers develop self-brands or own identities to project themselves to others. The latter viewpoint suggests that consumers use extant brand identities to anthropomorphize brands in order to foster a fit between the self and the brand. This phenomenon is consistent with what Kapferer (2012) postulates to be *self-image* and *reflection*, discussed in Pages 8 and 13.

It appears that elements that formulate brand identity are myriad and its dimensionality is illustrated by its constituent dimensions. According to Aaker (1996), a product, an organization, a person and a symbol of the brand are central to identity-based brand-building. Moreover, brand relationships, brand positioning, brand personality, brand vision, culture and presentation are critical dimensions in building a coherent brand identity (De Chernatony 2007). A differentiated brand identity can also be built by positioning the brand against competitors in consumers' minds, communicating the brand message through relevant channels, delivering brand performance that yields sustained competitive advantage and leveraging accumulated brand equity (Ghodeswar 2008). Whereas Casprini et al. (2019) regard brand founders, product attributes, and brand origin as critical elements in building a brand's identity.

Although some scholars argue that the identity school is prescriptive in nature (Schmidt and Redler 2018), external market factors are acknowledged but are considered secondary in brand strategy formulation. Understanding a firm's clients, competitors and the business environment remains important in building brand identity (Ghodeswar 2008). Therefore, identity-driven brand-building creates a lens through which clients view organizations (Heine et al. 2018). Additionally, even though Iglesias et al. (2020) argue that a balanced brand identity creation process entails the perspectives of both internal (manager) and external (customer) audiences, the authors concede that internal stakeholders have a substantial influence over the essence of a brand identity. External stakeholders merely share their interpretation of a brand's identity (image) as brand identity is delivered through external communication (Chung and Byrom 2021). Therefore, even though brand identity focus on internal strategic brand building, this process also needs to focus on how an external audience will receive the brand message.

Brand image

Brand image is conceptualized through understanding its main antecedents and consequences. According to Kapferer (2012), brand image is derived from consumers decoding a brand's identity, extracting meaning and interpreting brand elements and this yields brand awareness (Liu, Zhang, and Zhang 2020). Moreover, brand reputation is constituted by consumers' long-term gatherings of impression and evaluations of brand image (Caviggioli et al. 2020; Radomir and Moisescu 2020). Therefore, a causal correlation between brand identity and image, and brand image and reputation exists. Nevertheless, a fundamental pillar of the brand image school is that the consumer's perspective is central to understanding and developing brands. Brand-building is therefore perceived as a cognitive construction in the minds of external stakeholders as the focus shifts from senders encoding the brand message to receivers decoding it (Keller 2013). Schivinski et al. (2020) postulate that brand image association can either be functional or hedonic. Functional association are rational aspects such as brand credibility and quality, whereas hedonic associations encompass subjective emotional elements such as warmth and social approval (Keller and Swaminathan 2020; Yu et al. 2018). This view is also corroborated by Sultan and Wong (2019) who posit that brand image may be formulated by cognitive and emotive evaluations of a brand (Amaro, Barroco, and Antunes 2021).

In this regard, building a positive brand image is critical as consumers may use brands to enhance their social self or even inner self (*self-image* and *reflection*) based on the self-expressive brand perception theory (Choi and Burnham 2021; Kapferer 2012). Self-expressive theory refers to the degree that brand image matches a consumer's self-concept and to the extent it allows them to convey their "public or social self." This supports the narrative that consumers use brands for more profound reasons than product consumption. Hence positive brand image can be utilized as an important and reliable yardstick in predicting consumer purchase intentions as it alleviates consumer brand uncertainty (Teng 2020).

Additionally, the brand image school holds that the existence of a brand and the creation of brand equity stems from the interaction between the firm and active clients. Therefore, satisfying client needs and wants as well as those of other external stakeholders forms the basis of brand strategy formulation (Urde and Koch 2014). Brand image thus adopts a client value bias approach in brand-building and is characterized by client-centric business practices (Muhonen, Hirvonen, and Laukkanen 2017). Hence its foundation is market orientation, which approaches value creation from an outside-in viewpoint. Moreover, a study conducted by Tormala and Saraniemi (2018) posits that brand image is co-created and this process occurs within the stakeholders' ecosystem beyond a company's control. This study suggests that brand image is co-created through interactive social processes in multi-stakeholder networks. These stakeholders can directly influence brand image creation through involvement in various brand touchpoints, or indirectly through participating in an ongoing discourse about a brand. However, Grimm and Wagner (2021) caution against intra-brand image confusion in the brand image formulation process among consumers. The initial steps toward avoiding brand message dilution and confusion is aligning actual brand identity to its image (Stach 2015). Brand identity-image congruence directly impacts brand performance (Alvarado-Karste and Guzman 2020). Hence, we argue that in order to leverage brand identity-image fit, practitioners need to measure brand image adequately (Radomir and Moisescu 2020).

Brand identity-image congruence

The concept of congruence or fit stems from strategic management theory, reflecting the consistency between a firm's internal and external elements (L'Ecuyer and Raymond 2017; Srivastava and Thomas 2010). Burmann et al. (2017) postulate that integrating internal brand communications, actual products and actual values with external brand communication positively influences brand knowledge and subsequent performance. This means that the view held by a brand itself (identity) must at least be on an equal footing with its external image (Schmidt 2017). Such a high level of congruence between internal and external audiences emits a unified brand message to multiple stakeholders. This stance is corroborated by Piehler, Schade, and Burmann (2018), who contend that the degree to which internal and external brand communication are in sync affects brand understanding, brand commitment and brand behavior. Therefore, brand identity and brand image integration are crucial in building brand prosperity within a broader brand-building strategy (Bjur and Christo-Dionne 2016). Aligning brand identity with brand image is a critical strategic imperative, particularly in B2B service sectors, as client-brand experience may be the only means of demonstrating what a brand stands for (Schmeltz and Kjeldsen 2018). Thus, brand image and actual brand performance must be congruent (Anisimova 2009; Laforet 2010; Yang et al. 2019).

Another important element of building B2B services brand equity is identifying noise or interrupters that might cause a gap or misalignment between a brand's identity and its image (Urde and Greyser 2016, 102). Thus, aligning B2B services brand identity and brand image is central to building brand equity (Buil, Catalán, and Martínez 2016; Orazi et al. 2017, 552). However, there is no universally accepted framework aligning B2B services brand identity and brand image. The lack of a model integrating brand identity and brand image is also noted by Abratt, Kleyn, and Abimbola (2012, 18), who propose an integration framework. However, this framework solely depicts the interconnectedness between brand identity and brand image and is silent on how the two domains can be integrated to build brand equity. Although Mingione's (2015, 523–24) analysis of alignment models is critical of the alignment bias, she contends that such models are strategic assets that must conduct gap analysis to verify consistency and coherence between internal and external brand messaging. According to Coleman, De Chernatony, and Christodoulides (2011) brand identity network model, human resources, consistent communication, corporate visual identity, brand personality and employee and client focus are critical dimensions in building coherent B2B service brand identities. However, this model is not explicit on how firms can build identity-based brand equity. Hence the current study proposes a comprehensive congruence framework to build brand identity in B2B financial services in South Africa.

Business-to-business services branding

There is less research on branding in the services industry compared to pure goods branding. This paucity can be attributed to the familiarity between brand names and goods compared to the lesser familiarity between brand names and services. This is because service company names are essentially their brands. For example, clients may not necessarily know a bank's brand; however, knowing the name of the bank is obvious and sufficient due to the inseparability element (Davis 2007; Kapferer 2012). Therefore, branding is a critical element in services, which are viewed as both a function and an entity.

Even though business-to-consumer (B2C) services branding may share common practices with B2B services such as client value creation, there are fundamental differences in their target markets, which suggests differences in applicable brand strategies (Saarijärvi, Grönroos, and Kuusela 2014). Marquardt, Golicic, and Davis (2011) posit that B2B services brands ought to develop compelling and unique value propositions that focus more on client experiences and relationships. Such client experiences involve multiple interactions across various brand touchpoints; therefore, coherence is critical in an attempt to build long-term value propositions beyond point of sale (Zolkiewski et al. 2017). Thus, B2B services require more intimate relationships and a higher degree of trust among all stakeholders due to often complex business operations (Heirati and Siahtiri 2017).

B2B services are characterized by customized business solutions as they offer distinct and direct value to clients, and this necessitates brand identity clarification. Moorthi (2002) suggests that strategic B2B services brand identity should be conceptualized by fusing brand identity constituent dimensions (such as brand values, personality and culture) and services marketing principles (product, price, place, promotion, physical evidence, process and people). A study conducted by Campbell et al. (2010) argues that B2B services brand identity should match the image of partners and suppliers as this will reduce the likelihood of misalignment with business stakeholders. Similarly, a recent study conducted by An et al. (2018) on the identity signaling theory effect of B2B service brands' credibility or image found that brand identity internal interconnectedness influences how stakeholders develop a sense of affinity, alignment or oneness (brand image) with the initial brand identity. These perspectives are corroborated in a recent study by Endo, de Farias, and Coelho (2019) who found that B2B services branding relies on a strong value proposition, leadership involvement, credibility and reputation. These characteristics are strategic imperatives, particularly in B2B banking services, where trust between the client and the bank is a determinant of brand preference and loyalty – two attributes which yield long-term business prosperity or brand switching. The current study is situated in this realm.

However, due to the hierarchical structures of B2B financial institutions, a bank's brand identity construal may vary across different levels and units. Such incongruity hinders the firm from projecting its actual brand identity to external stakeholders (Jahanzeb, Fatima, and Butt 2013; Powell et al. 2009). It is apparent that brand identity clarification is an important subject matter, yet research on B2B banks' brand identity is scant. Moreover, extant brand identity frameworks are largely conceptual due to a paucity of empirical testing in real-life contexts, particularly in the B2B bank sector (Pareek 2015). In this regard, this study explores the applicability of a prominent brand identity framework, namely Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism, within the South African B2B banking sector.

Brand identity prism

Kapferer's (2012, 158) Brand Identity Prism approaches brand-building from the twin points of view of externalization and internalization, based on picture of sender and picture of receiver standpoints. The BIP is hence relevant to the current brand identity-image investigation. *Brand Physique* is the first dimension of the prism; it refers to the concrete aspects that are triggered in consumers' minds when a brand is mentioned. These could be sensory and objective brand characteristics such as colors, shapes or designs (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008; Kapferer 2012). These elements are also noted by Keller (2013, 59, 167) and Coleman, De Chernatony, and Christodoulides (2015) as important visual presentations that make brands recognizable and distinctive. *Brand personality* imbues brands with human characteristics; thus, a brand assumes a character and personality (Burmann et al. 2017; Kapferer 2001, 2012). Derived from the theory of anthropomorphism, brand personality-driven brand management refers to enlivening a brand for stakeholders (MacInnis and Folkes 2017; Rauschnabel et al. 2016). *Brand culture* emanates from the cultural values of the original brand developer(s) and is often associated with geographical origins. Brand culture may also emerge from an organization's guiding values and principles (Beverland 2018; Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2008; Kapferer 2012).

Furthermore, Kapferer (2012, 159) posits that the *relationship* dimension refers to engagements between firms and clients and is particularly crucial in the banking sector as services are essentially relationships. Chenet, Dagger, and O'Sullivan (2010) affirm that brand-client relationships in B2B bank services serve as compelling brand differentiation indicators. The last two dimensions that complete the BIP are picture of the receiver dimensions based on *self-image* and *reflection*. The former alludes to the image that clients have of themselves when consuming the brand and can be seen as the target market's own internal mirror. The latter depicts how a client would like to be perceived as a result of consuming a particular brand (Kapferer 2012). However, the BIP's plausibility and applicability in the B2B banking sector is unknown, a gap which is explored in the current study.

Branding banks: the South African banking sector

Bank brands are often viewed as generic since they do not require significantly divergent skills or competencies to render services effectively (Devlin and McKechnie 2008, 664). Branding is therefore particularly important as it differentiates a bank's brand from its competitors. In order to be distinctive, bank brands need to create positive service experiences through client assurance, responsiveness and empathy (Cottam and De Chernatony 2006, 624). This aligns a bank's brand promise with service quality. This is essential as it continuously reiterates the brand's inner sense while consistently meeting and exceeding client needs. Chenet, Dagger, and O'Sullivan (2010, 341) examined the role of service differentiation in bank services and found that service quality and trust directly influence brand differentiation and preference. Differentiated bank services therefore gain client trust and commitment. A similar observation is made by Bopat (2017, 644), who contends that a pleasant brand experience in a bank fosters long-term relationships, loyalty and trust. Trust is particularly important in fiduciary services such as banking since clients may feel vulnerable when financial needs emerge. Perceived value and corporate credibility are other important brand experience dimensions of financial services brands. Even the appearance of service staff (which can reflect whether the service provider possesses expertise, trustworthiness, warmth and empathy) is a critical factor in determining a client's choice of bank (Dean 2017, 776).

Brand identity clarification and differentiation is more vital in oligopolistic bank sectors such as the South African banking sector (Zwakala, Steenkamp, and Haydam 2017). This notion is corroborated by PwC's 2019 South African banking sector outlook, which indicates that major banks remain focused on strategic initiatives such as driving greater cohesion and collaborations within management teams (PwC n.d.). Moreover, this sector is characterized by a concentrated market structure due to the dominance of five banks – First National Bank, Absa, Standard Bank, Investec and Nedbank. These banks were also the most valuable bank brands in 2019, according to the global brand research group, Brand Finance (BusinessTech n.d.; Wanke, Maredza, and Gupta 2017). Hence, brand identity clarification and differentiation are particularly important due to the fiercely competitive environment (Simatele 2015, 826). The South African banking system is well developed and effectively regulated by the South African Reserve Bank. The sector consists of 19 banks, 14 of which are local and five foreign. The sector comprises total assets of R5.14 trillion, with the five largest banks holding 90% of total assets as at the end of 2017.

The major bank brands remain focused on strategic initiatives such as product diversification, employee skills development and collaboration in order to build cohesive brands that can compete in the market (PwC n.d.). Bank brand performance is also indicated by the number of clients. According to BusinessTech (n.d.), Absa's 2020 interim results reported a client base of 9.7 million clients. However, because its primary target market is retail accounts, Capitec Bank has the highest number of clients at 14.5 million. Standard Bank's 2020 interim report claimed a base of 9.1 million active clients while Nedbank and FNB reported 7.3 million and 8.2 million clients respectively. The landscape of this sector has changed rapidly as the aforementioned banks face increasing competition from newly established digital banks such as Discovery Bank and TymeBank. The former continues to grow its client base with 489 000 clients in 2020, while the latter reported two million clients in the same year (BusinessTech n.d.; Research and Markets n.d.).

The benefits of virtual banks are myriad, with convenience being the most notable. However, the lack of tangible client engagement to attain brand loyalty through hearts and minds remains a concern (Badenhorst n.d.). However, well-established traditional bank brands are purported to hold high levels of client trust through brand heritage (Border Access n.d.). These changes in the sector provide clients with broad bank choices, thus directly influencing brand performance (PwC n.d.).

Methodology

Determining an appropriate methodology to uncover an inquiry is contextual and dictated by the nature of the research problem (Babin and Zikmund 2016). The current study explored the applicability of a prominent brand identity framework – Kapferer's BIP – in the B2B bank services context. Therefore, the initial research discourse was deductive. The findings of the empirical exploration, coupled with the identification of additional dimensions from extant brand identity theories, resulted to the development of a new conceptual framework, the BI-IC framework for B2B banks. Subsequently, the research discourse became inductive (Clow and James 2014). Figure 1 below demonstrates the study's scientific research process and reasoning.

Woiceshyn and Daellenbach (2018) posit that to advance knowledge, a balance of inductive and deductive research is required. Against this background and the research problem at hand, this study empirically explored the applicability of an existing theory (BIP) in a new context (B2B banks). Therefore, research objectives (RB) and research questions (RQ) were formulated to test the BIP dimensions in selected South African B2B banks. Moreover, theories and concepts from empirical findings and extant branding literature were used to formulate a new theory – the BI-IC framework – which serves as the study's main conceptual contribution (Hyde 2000).

Therefore, the research gap identified in this study is two-pronged: (i) extant brand identity frameworks remain largely conceptual due to a lack of

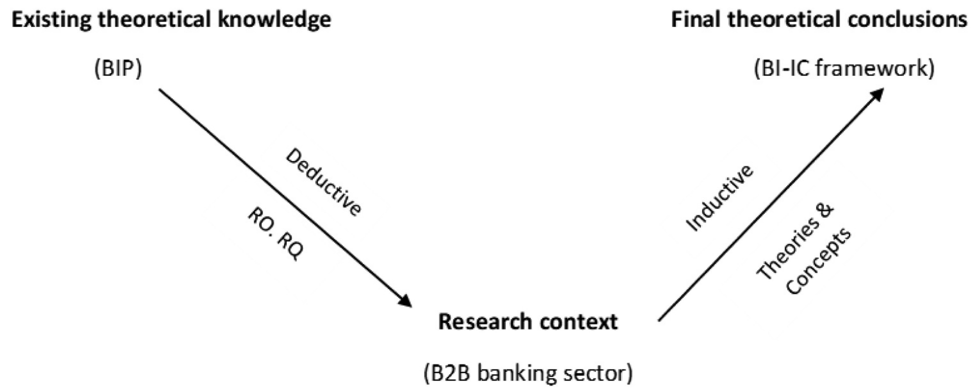

Figure 1. Pure deductive and inductive research process. Source: Author's notes adapted from Kovacs, Spens, and van Hoek (2005, 137)

empirical interrogation, particularly in B2B services (Pareek 2015). To this end Mingione (2015) postulates that extant brand identity theory underestimates complex sectors characterized by diverse contexts and stakeholders; (ii) moreover, there is no universally accepted framework to align brand identity and brand image in the South African B2B bank brands context. The absence of such a framework may cause challenges in brand identity formulation strategies in this sector (Nexus 2017; Sabinet 2017). The current study therefore addresses two research objectives:

(1) To explore the applicability of the BIP in selected B2B banks in South Africa;
(2) To identify additional dimensions to develop a comprehensive BI-IC framework for B2B banks in South Africa.

This study employed the methodological precepts of interpretive exploratory qualitative research. This research approach was deemed most appropriate to provide in-depth insights into the applicability of an existing model in a new context (Malhotra, Nunan, and Birks 2017). Qualitative data collection techniques were deemed appropriate (Cooper and Schindler 2006) as the study sought to extrapolate in-depth data regarding the BIP applicability and validity in a new context (Whetten 1989, 493).

Study sample

The top five South African banks according to assets market share were targeted to test the applicability of the BIP. Collectively, these top five banks hold 90% of the South African banking sector assets market share. They were also ranked as the most valuable South African bank brands in 2019 according to the global brand research group, Brand Finance (BusinessTech n.d.; Wanke, Maredza, and Gupta 2017). The sample inclusion criteria were based on the aforementioned background. Therefore, a non-probability judgmental sampling technique was used. The selection of population elements was pre-determined in accordance with brand ranking and market share dominance, and hence the top five bank brands were chosen (Bryman et al. 2014). The selection of study participants was also purposeful; depth interviews were conducted with marketing executives who are instrumental in brand strategy formulation in the banks concerned. Consequently, eight marketing executives were interviewed (Bank A n = 2; Bank B n = 2; Bank C n = 1; Bank D n = 1; Bank E n = 2). The BIP applicability exploration concurrently extrapolated the bank's brand identities. This was a crucial phase of the data collection and interpretation as the study also aimed to identify new concepts to construct a new theory/model. This sampling approach is in accordance with Malhotra, Nunan, and Birks (2017, 71) who suggest that in a flexible, loosely structured and evolutionary approach, personal interviews with industry expert should be considered. The authors further note that suitable samples for evolutionary qualitative studies are aimed at generating maximum insights and are small and non-representative.

A recurring question that arises in qualitative research is what constitutes an adequate sample. Qualitative research appreciates that some participants' feedback would be richer than others as they provide deeper insights into a phenomenon, the participants being marketing executives, in the context of this study (Bradley 2013; Malhotra 2015; Marshal 1996). Boddy (2016) posits that saturation may occur after six depth interviews but may be apparent after twelve interviews in a single market/ context of a homogeneous population. Against this background and given the focused nature of the study as well as the homogeneity of the sector under investigation, the sample size was in accordance with recommendations in the literature (Steenkamp et al. 2020, 60). Consistency of findings on the applicability (or lack thereof) of the BIP dimensions was evident after six bank marketing executives were interviewed. Saturation became apparent at eight interviews, thus justifying the choice of eight face-to-face individual depth interviews to be conducted with marketing executives who were influential in formulating banks' brand identities in the South African B2B banking sector.

Data collection and analysis process

Brand identity process: The initial data needed was the determination of the applicability of the BIP (findings are reported in the next section); this process concurrently distilled brand identities in the South African banking sector. Therefore, in the first phase of data collection, banks' brand identities were distilled through face-to-face individual depth interviews with marketing executives. The sample inclusion criteria were marketing executives who were directly responsible for the development and management of each banks' brand identity because this study accepts that human beings are actively engaged in constructing knowledge, hence brand identity construction can be influenced by an individual's personal identity, background and beliefs (Hesse-Biber 2010; Iofrida et al. 2018). In the context of this study, the researchers' standpoint is that the marketing executives' personal identities and beliefs largely influenced the banks' brand identity formulation. These individuals could be considered experts in the sector as they directly influenced brand identity formulation in their institutions (Sevel et al. 2018:21). In some instances, one marketing executive met this criterion, which meant that the participant was solely responsible for leading strategic brand identity creation. Whereas in other banks two marketing executive were entrusted with brand identity strategy formulation.

Moreover, interviews are a primary data collection technique in qualitative studies (Cooper and Schindler 2006). This method is unstructured and probes extensively to encourage participants to engage freely in order to express detailed beliefs, perceptions and feelings on a topic (Feinberg et al. 2013:219; Wiid & Diggines 2013:95). This technique, in-depth interviews (IDIs) was therefore deemed best suited for a brand identity insight, and brand image/perception study.

Meeting appointments were requested by the researcher and accepted by research participants in the sector concerned. The face-to-face semi-structured individual depth interviews were conducted by the corresponding researchers from November 2019 to March 2020. Interview guides and an audio recorder were used to collect the data, where after the recordings of all interviews were transcribed. As stated in the methodology section, to further extract banks' actual brand identities, branding information contained on websites, annual reports and media releases was analyzed. Essentially, this process triangulated one qualitative data collection method with one qualitative data analysis technique, namely, face-to-face individual depth interviews and content analysis (Malhotra, Nunan, and Birks 2017). This qualitative data analysis method is consistent with the suggestions of Babin and Zikmund (2016, 219) and Malhotra, Nunan, and Birks (2017, 254) who state that in qualitative research, content analysis is a method of analyzing textual material, forms of communication, images, and web pages, among many others. Accordingly, branding content was extracted from banks' interim and annual reports between the years 2018 and 2019. A total of 10 reports were accessed via the banks' websites, coupled with the banks' brand information obtained from the websites of five marketing media houses.

Themes were predetermined in accordance with BIP dimensions, and a manual thematic analysis method was applied in analyzing the banks' brand information contained in reports (Park and Park 2017; Esfehani and Walters 2018). Because of predetermined codes and themes, only three of the six phases of the thematic analysis steps were applicable, namely:

(1) Banks' branding content was initially read to gain familiarity and a holistic understanding of a banks' brand identity.
(2) Banks' branding content was re-read to detect similarities with the predetermined BIP themes.
(3) The description, analysis and discussion of empirical findings are depicted in Figure 2 and discussed in the following section.

The thematic analysis method was deemed appropriate for bank branding content analysis because it permitted verbatim data presentation. The data is therefore presented in a format that enables the reader to make sense of how the data was interpreted. The direct quotations demonstrate consistency and transparency during the interpretation and analysis process (Esfehani and Walters 2018).

Interview guides design process: The aim of the interview guide for the banks was to explore the applicability the Brand Identity Prism in B2B banks. Therefore, each interview question was linked to at least one of the BIP dimensions. This process simultaneously extrapolated brand identities from South African banks. Banks' brand identity empirical data was then transcribed and analyzed to distil banks' actual brand identities.

Data collection environment: All interviews were conducted by the corresponding researcher on the premises of each institution in Johannesburg, South Africa. Each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed. Thereafter, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software programme, ATLAS.ti Windows version 8, was used to code the primary data for analysis. Creswell and Miller (2000) posit that the credibility of a study is established by an audit trail; researchers must clearly document all research decisions and activities. The ATLAS.ti records serve this purpose in the current study. This software was deemed appropriate, given the study's research problem, methodology and the need for in-depth findings. The BIP dimensions primarily informed the coding system. Figure 2 presents an excerpt from the ATLAS.ti code network showing the applicable BIP dimensions for one of the banks.

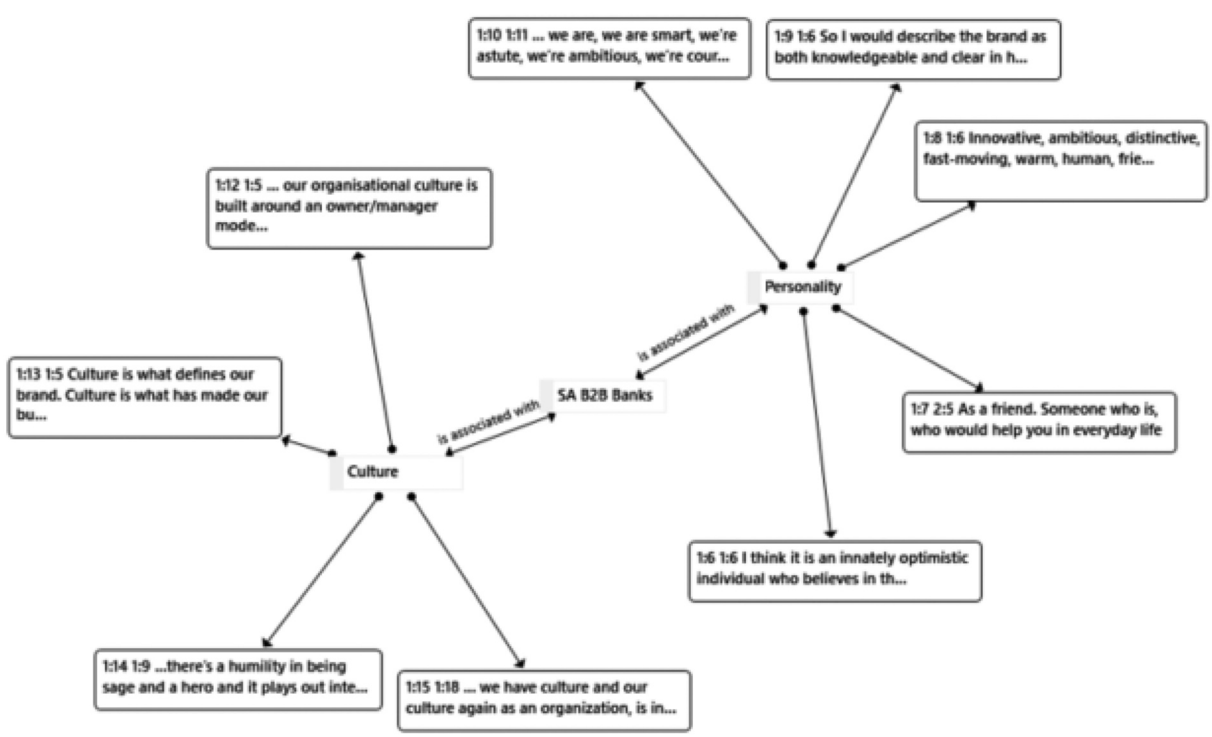

Figure 2. Code network. Source: Author's notes ATLAS.ti project

Figure 2 depicts a graphic presentation of applicable BIP dimensions in one bank brand; however, empirical findings are expounded on in the following section.

Research findings and discussion

The study investigated the applicability of the BIP in the South African B2B banking sector to gauge its plausibility, robustness and validity in this context. Therefore, the first research objective was to identify BIP dimensions that were confirmed applicable and those that were confirmed inapplicable to selected B2B bank brands. This objective was achieved, as shown in Figure 3, which presents an amended BIP in accordance with its applicability in selected South African B2B banks.

The dimensions *physique, personality, culture* and *relationships* were all found to be applicable in the top five leading banks in South Africa. Bank names are renamed Bank A to E. Direct quotations from the banks' marketing executives confirm this conclusion. Citations from ATLAS.ti coded interview transcripts were referenced as follows: *2.3 We are the biggest bank brand in Africa (408:765)*. This indicates that the quotation comes from the second participant/marketing executive in a particular bank brand, and the quotation is the third to be coded from the interview transcript. The quotation starts at character 408 and ends at 765 in the specific transcript.

Physique

Bank A – *1:2 That purpose is then manifested in our brand, both visually, creatively and experientially. And we have created an external expression of that in the word Africanacity. Africanacity is defined as the innately African ability to always find a way to get something done (677:944).*

The quotation above from a marketing executive suggests that Bank A's visual identity and payoffline, 'Africanacity' may be triggered in clients' minds when the name Bank A is mentioned.

Bank B – *2:1 . . . what makes our brand stand out is our symbol. It's very iconic and recognizable. I think our symbol is definitely our strongest visual (506:891).*

A Bank B marketing executive stated that their brand symbol was the most important and iconic visual identity element as can be seen in the quotation above.

Bank C- *We developed the bank's brand identity to express their leadership status by leveraging the Out of the Ordinary brand idea and the bold black and white spirit of the zebra* (The Partners, n.d.).

An adverting agency (The Partners) that was tasked with developing the bank's brand identity, gave an account of the strategy that informs the bank's visual representation.

Bank D – *1:25 Our green, it stands out, it means so many things. Green is nurturing, it's earthy, it's speaks to life and what-not but on the other side it speaks to affluence and aristocracy (12406:12677).*

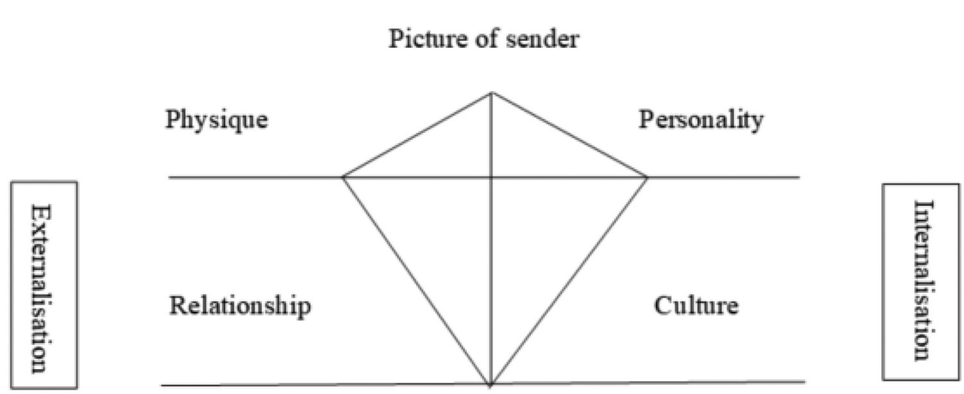

Figure 3. Brand identity prism dimensions applicable to B2B banks. Source: Author's notes adapted from Kapferer (2012, 158)

A Bank D marketing executive gives an emotive and philosophical account of the importance of their brand elements and how they collectively formulate their brand's visual identity.

Bank E – *2:2 … our color palettes and our primary color, which is blue. It's the electric blue we use largely but there is a range of blues that we use and then complimentary colors like, there's white and then there's a cream color or champagne (1095:1527).*

A Bank E marketing executive remarked that the bank's brand colors are what make their brand distinguishable. This quotation confirms physique applicability in this bank as well.

Personality

Bank A – *1:6 I think it is an innately optimistic individual who believes in the potential and possibility of this continent and its people (2386:2585).*

A marketing executive from Bank A described the bank's persona as an optimistic person, as can be seen in the quotation above.

Bank B – *2:5 As a friend. Someone who would help you in everyday life (1889:1956).*

Bank B is purported to be a caring brand persona according to one marketing executive as mentioned above.

Bank C – *1:6 Innovative, ambitious, distinctive, fast-moving, warm, human, friendly, engaging, people matter … (2916:3100).*

A range of personality traits that describe Bank C's brand personality were mentioned by a participant, thus confirming the applicability of construct in this context as well.

Bank D – *1:6 I would describe the brand as both knowledgeable and clear in how it helps people to see, to treat money differently … (1954:2592).*

A Bank D marketing executive portrayed the banks' brand personality as someone who is knowledgeable and confident.

Bank E – *1:11 … we are smart, we're astute, we're ambitious, we're courageous, we're in touch with what's going on in the world around us … (5260:6385).*

The marketing executives presents Bank E as intelligent and somewhat socially conscious persona as can be seen in the quotation above.

Culture

Bank A – *For our people, we will create a culture that appreciates, unifies and differentiates us from our competitors. We are driven by our purpose and guided by our promises, we live by our values …* (Bank A Group Limited Interim Financial Results 2019).

As can be seen in the quotation above, the bank defines the culture it wants to embed in order to be differentiated.

Bank B – *1:5 … our culture encourages empowerment and initiative and accountability … (2936:3314).*

The quotation above presents what appears to be a business practice brand culture. Bank B's marketing executive mentions accountability, leadership and communication channels as elements that inform their culture and values.

Bank C – *1:5 … we are nonhierarchical. We have a flat structure, everything is processed whether you are the CEO or a junior intern, everyone has a voice and [is] able to express their opinion … (2169:2788).*

The quotation below from a marketing executive at Bank C reveals what seems to be an employee-centered organizational culture.

Bank D – *Culture: Our culture and our people, investing in their development and our collective knowledge, skills and experience to enable innovative and competitive solutions for our clients* (Bank D Integrated Report 2018).

A 2018 report described what the bank's culture is and what it stands for, as can be seen above.

Bank E – *1:18 … our culture again as an organization is informed by what we are, which is an African company and hence, it is informed by a number of different values (8078:8601).*

The quotation above suggests that Bank E's culture is centered around "Africaness" as a value.

Relationships

Bank A – *1:21 … we're looking for people who want to be on a journey with us, to help us co-create that future. So we try to encourage feedback, conversation and participation at different levels (8150:8443).*

In the quotation above, Bank A's marketing executive suggest that the bank is looking for long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with their clients.

Bank B – *1:14 For various reasons, we would like to see it as a more long-term relationship and I think we do have very loyal customers (8058:8552).*

As can be seen from the quotation above, Bank B's marketing executive stated that long-term partnerships were how the bank envisioned its relationship with clients.

Bank C – *We will continue to encourage an energetic, relationship-focused environment that attracts driven individuals who consistently seek to go the extra mile for the client. Client relationship managers in each business. Building deep durable relationships with our clients and creating new client relationships* (Bank C Annual Report 2019).

Bank C 2019 annual report was very explicit on the type of relationship it pursues with its stakeholders.

Bank D – *1:18 We see them as partners in this journey and we are desperate to do good for our partners. So it's a partnership with mutual goals and mutual aspirations (7843:7996).*

According to a Bank D marketing executive, the bank has established long-term partnerships with its clients which are typified by mutual respect and loyalty.

Bank E – *1:9 . . . understand that we are the brand that will progress them in life wherever they are and wherever they're going (3656:4528).*

The quotation above is from Bank E's marketing executive who claims the bank's brand-client relationship captures its brand promise so that clients can get clarity on the future with the brand.

However, two BIP dimensions, namely, *self-image* and *reflection*, were found inapplicable in selected South African banks. Next the researchers postulate possible theoretical reasons for the inapplicability of self-image and reflection dimensions. These conclusions are also supported by empirical data.

Self-Image

According to Kapferer (2012, 162), *self-image* is the picture that consumers have of themselves based on their consumption of specific brands. Hence consumers are seen as the target market's own internal mirror (Grimm and Wagner 2021). Self-image is a representation of the thoughts and feelings of consumers derived from brand usage and association (Sung and Huddleston 2018). It is therefore improbable to define self-image as an identity dimension. This dimension is client- or customer-based, which inherently situates it within the brand image school and not brand identity. Therefore, from an internal or identity viewpoint, marketing executives can only depict an abstract 'client self-image' according to how they imagine their clients would view themselves based on consuming their brand. This conclusion is based on the quotation below.

Bank-A *2:24 Either because . . . it's a cool place to do business with or they do really, they play a really important role in society or actually they're really cool and funky to be associated with, which is not really a banking thing. (15947:16329)*

Bank-B *1:7 What we have tried to build around the brand story is that it's really about offering help to people so that they can help themselves, that they're truly empowered. (4062:4543)*

Bank-C *1:10 That they have a connection at a human level, that our brand understands them as an individual. (4142:4562)*

Bank-D *1:5 We deal in money and it is our hope that in helping them see money differently, we will be able to help them realize that money well-managed can make a real difference in people's lives. (1478:1663)*

Bank-E *2:20 So for me, I believe that clients go to a bank not so much [for] the image that will portray them. (12217:12735)*

Reflection

The *reflection* dimension refers to how customers would like to be perceived as a result of using certain brands (Kapferer 2012, 162). Reflection is the customer's actual or aspirational image that they would like to portray. Similarly to self-image, reflection is customer-based since consumers purchase brands as a means of self-expression. Reflection is inherently a brand image dimension. Hence it is impractical for a firm to have an accurate view on how external customers would like to be perceived based on brand usage. Excerpts of quotations from the banks' marketing executives confirm these findings. Marketing executives could only give abstract responses on clients' reflection.

Bank-A *1:19 We're looking for people who want to be on a journey with us, to help us co-create that future. (8349:8443)*

Bank-B *1:13 So I think what we would like to believe and encourage is that the kind of person that is drawn to FNB is . . . more of a kind of self-starter, potentially someone who's not satisfied with good enough. (7138:7842)*

Bank-C *1:12 The image that we have of our clients is that they're successful, innovative, invigorated, wanting to connect on a human level and create great businesses and also, create great businesses for South Africa. (6057:6261)*

Bank-D *1:19 We appreciate our clients for their varying degrees of expertise where money's concerned. (7753:7840)*

Bank-E *1:38 We sometimes we have completely re-imagine our client journeys. (18085:18147)*

As noted earlier in this section, self-image and reflection can be viewed as the "Picture of the Receiver" dimensions in the BIP. Therefore, the BIP is constituted by both internal/identity and external/image dimensions. However, Kapferer does not explicitly allude to brand image; in this model brand image (externalization and picture of the receiver) is approached from an identity viewpoint. Consequently, this study suggests a BI-IC framework for B2B banks, which serves as the study's theoretical contribution. The BI-IC framework addresses the second research objective – to identify dimensions to construct the BI-IC framework for B2B banks.

Theoretical contribution and significance

The study makes a novel contribution to the body of literature on strategic brand identity-image alignment for B2B banks. Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997) contend that what counts as a contribution is that which is perceived as novel in light of the extant literature. Extant brand management literature (Ries and Trout 2001; Schmidt and Redler 2018) presents brand identity and brand image domains as independent schools of thought. The current study posits that brand image is a consequence of communicated brand identity (Kapferer 2012). Therefore, a causal relationship between brand identity and brand image is postulated (Whetten 1989, 491). Thus, the BI-IC model is unique because it argues and provides a framework for the reconfiguration and alignment of the two domains.

Moreover, Weick (1989) as quoted by Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997) states that a contribution to knowledge lies in identifying construct relationships and connections that have previously not been detected. The BI-IC framework's constituent dimensions were derived from findings of an empirical investigation of the BIP, coupled with the suggested connections and relationship of constructs in extant brand management literature. Therefore, this study puts forward a synthesized conceptual framework (an amendment of the BIP), which may align brand identity and image in B2B banks, which is explicated next.

Brand identity-image congruence framework for B2B banks

As reported in the study's findings, BIP identity dimensions were found applicable in selected South African B2B banks; however, image dimension were inapplicable in the same context. Consequently, a congruence framework for B2B banks is proposed – the Brand Identity-Image Congruence (BI-IC) framework for B2B banks (see Figure 4). This framework serves two purposes: (i) it is the main conceptual contribution of the study and thus addressed the second research objective, which was to identify additional dimensions to develop a comprehensive BI-I C framework; (ii) it may serve as a strategic tool for practitioners in B2B banking sectors to build coherent brand identities. Its constituent dimensions were derived from the study's empirical findings coupled with additional dimensions identified through a dialectical review of extant brand identity theory.

Brand identity steering wheel

The purpose of the brand identity steering wheel is to structure a brand's identity heuristically. It is submitted that an application of the amended brand identity steering wheel can build a cohesive B2B services brand identity as it directly controls how a brand is communicated and interpreted by all stakeholders. It is therefore

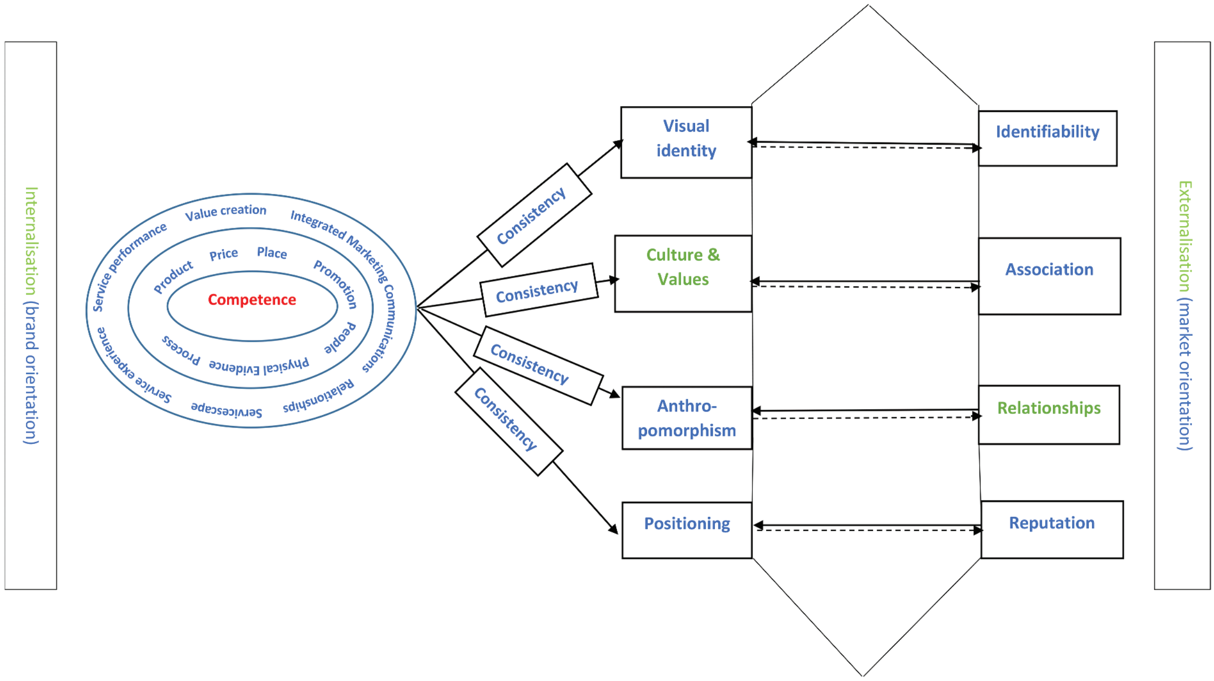

Figure 4. Brand identity-image congruence for B2B bank brands. Source: Researchers own construction, adapted from Schmitt and Rogers (2008, 65) and Kapferer (2012:158).

adopted in this study as a primary tool to heuristically manage brand identity and brand image alignment in B2B banks (Schmitt and Rogers 2008, 64). Competence is depicted at the center of the amended steering wheel to demonstrate the importance of competent employees that can portray a brand's actual brand identity particularly in B2B services. When employees are competent, B2B services firms too assume a status of competence, superiority and ultimately, market dominance (Keller 2013; Kotler and Pfoertsch 2006; Schmitt and Rogers 2008).

Service marketing mix

A comprehensive marketing mix is the basis of building coherent B2B services brand identities. The expansion of the traditional 4Ps of the marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion) to 7Ps (by adding people, physical evidence and process) illustrates a comprehensive marketing strategy that is applicable to the services context (Ivy 2008). The services marketing mix is thus central to firms' strategies as it creates demand and solicits consumer responses (Gronroos 2007; Harrington, Ottenbacher, and Fauser 2017). Hence it is seen as an integral element to the BI-IC congruence framework and its context.

Product – service performance

A prerequisite of building brand identity is how the actual product or service satisfies consumers' needs (Keller 2013). In the context of this study, service performance is a critical dimension as it may be an antecedent of consumer brand perception or image formulation (Krystallis and Chrysochou 2014). Therefore, service performance directly influences brand performance, which is measured by consumers' brand awareness and loyalty (Venkatraman and Ramanujam 1986). Brand performance should be monitored in order to assess the impact of aligning brand identity to brand image (Ghodeswar 2008).

Price – value

Price is an important element in building brands and their identities for both the firms and consumers. Price indicates a firm's performance in the market and subsequently determines brand equity. Price may also be a value indicator to consumers and consequently facilitates their brand interpretation and decision-making process (Keller 2015).

Place – service distribution

Unlike traditional goods sectors, distribution in the services sector is characterized by inseparability as the services are produced, distributed and consumed simultaneously (Shanker 2010). For instance, service distribution in the banking sector may take the form of face-to-face interaction with a salesperson, an online platform interaction or even through automated teller machines. Overall, service distribution convenience plays a critical role in clients' brand perceptions and affords service providers to demonstrate what they stand for (Black, Childers, and Vincent 2014).

Promotion – integrated marketing communication

An aggressive and attractive promotional mix is pivotal in differentiating and conveying brand identity (Chinomona 2016). Effective brand communication is particularly important in a services context as it helps to create credibility, reassurance and an overall positive brand image (Kaura 2013). A congruent brand identity-image can be achieved by consistently communicating brand elements in various brand touchpoints and this can be achieved applying integrated marketing communication (Foroudi et al. 2017; Nandan 2005).

People – relationships

The production and consumption of a service often requires the participation of both the service provider and the customer, even though the level of participation may vary from sector to sector. In the banking sector, the level of client participation is high and therefore clients are seen as co-creators of the service (Black, Childers, and Vincent 2014). Hence employee behavior should be underpinned by emotional intelligence during the service co-creation as this directly influences how a brand is perceived (Kearney et al. 2017). Moreover, employees' input is particularly critical in B2B services brand identity as employees embody the service brand and its performance (Anderson and Smith 2017; Buil, Catalán, and Martínez 2016; Coleman, De Chernatony, and Christodoulides 2015).

Process – service experience

Due to the inseparability service element, a firm, its employees and its customers are part of the services process (Black, Childers, and Vincent 2014). Process comprises technical and administrative procedures in rendering the service, and this directly influences customer experience. Therefore, unique and client experience-based value propositions are more critical in building B2B financial services brand identity (Marquardt, Golicic, and Davis 2011; Ylilehto 2018).

Physical evidence – servicescape

Physical evidence comprises tangible service elements and infrastructure such as the facilities, apparatus and people used to render the services (Kumar, Dash, and Malhotra 2018; Steenkamp 2016). The physical environment therefore renders the service process tangible. In practice, services can be made tangible through service attributes such as "servicescape," décor and furnishings (Ding and Keh 2017). Essentially, servicescape is the ambience or the physical environment where the service occurs and may influence clients' brand construal ((Kaura 2013; Steenkamp 2016).

Consistency

This study submits that, if consistently applied, the amended brand identity steering wheel may serve as a useful framework for building coherent brand identity through constituent dimension such as visual identity, culture and values, personality and positioning. The brand identity steering wheel is thus an apparatus which when consistently applied can heuristically build congruent B2B services brands (Duncan 2008, 2008; Dwivedi and McDonald 2018; Foroudi et al. 2017).

Visual identity – identifiability

Brand physique, which refers to a brand's visual aspects which are triggered in the consumer's mind when the brand name is mentioned (Kapferer 2012, 158), was confirmed to be applicable in the study and thus retained in the BI-IC framework. However, it was renamed *visual identity* as it is more an encompassing dimension (Coleman, De Chernatony, and Christodoulides 2011; Keller 2013; Keller and Swaminathan 2020). Moreover, brand identifiability is postulated as a congruence indicator in the BI-IC framework. This position is consistent with that of Coleman, De Chernatony, and Christodoulides (2015), insofar as a brand's visual identity makes it identifiable and unique (Erjansola et al. 2021).

Culture and values – association

The culture and values dimension was also confirmed as an important dimension in building brand identity in the South African B2B banking sector. Extant literature notes brand culture as a critical brand identity dimension, often emanating from the values of the original brand developers (Beverland 2018; McCoy and Venter 2016). As can be seen in Figure 4, association is theorized to be a culture and values dimension congruence indicator. This supposition is consistent with Keller (1993) and Michel and Donthu (2014) who claim that brand associations are constructs that engage consumers emotionally, functionally and attitudinally.

Anthropomorphism – relationships

Brand personality was also found applicable in the study's context and was thus retained in the BI-IC framework. The BIP states that brand personality is the attribution of human characteristics to a brand so that it assumes a character and personality (Burmann et al. 2017; Kapferer 2001, 2012; Keller 2013). As can been seen in Figure 4, anthropomorphism is preferred over personality; the former emanates from the theory of anthropomorphism which imbues non-human objects with humanlike traits (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007; Tapar et al. 2018). Figure 4 also shows *relationships* as a congruence indicator and measure of congruent brand anthropomorphism (Delgado-Ballester, Palazon, and Pelaez 2020). This supposition is consistent with Tuskej and Podnar (2018), who contend that consumers identify and relate more strongly with corporate brands and build more solid relations with them when consumers perceive the brand to be more humanlike.

Positioning – reputation

Brand positioning is designing a firm's offering in such a manner that it occupies a distinct place in consumers' minds (Alsem 2007). Consequently, brand positioning has a substantial influence on clarifying a bank's brand identity (Sihvonen 2019). Lee, Kim, and Won (2018) argue that the basis of brand positioning is aligning consumer perceptions with the true identity of a brand. In this light, the BI-IC framework posits that a brand's reputation is a measure of the effectiveness of its positioning strategy. Endo, de Farias, and Coelho (2019) make a similar observation, claiming that service brands rely on a strong value proposition, credibility and reputation.

Implications for business marketing practice

This study also seeks to contribute to managerial brand-building efforts. It is imperative for brand managers to understand the theoretical underpinning of brand identity dimensions prior to engaging in brand identity-image congruence initiatives.

The study's findings explored brand identities of selected B2B banks in South Africa. This was an important first phase of the study to develop a blueprint to measure brand identity-image fit. Incongruences emerged between marketing executives of bank brands in their account of what their brands stood for in certain instances. This points to discrepancies in brand identity formulation and communication strategies in these banks. The findings of the study provide new insights into the South African B2B banking sector on brand identity and brand image incongruities. Consequently, the current study submits that brand managers in this sector should firstly delineate their brand identities, and thereafter, seek alignment with all external stakeholders as brand identity is mirrored through consumer-based brand image. We also recommend that managers should move beyond merely communicating brand identities to create brand awareness; brand identity creation should focus on creating and sustaining brand-consumer bonds. The reinforcement of brand-consumer bonds not only influences brand advocacy, but it also enhances consumers' social class and belonging. Therefore, brand managers should build brand identities capable of establishing brand communities even though, according to Hatch and Schultz (2010), the cultures and morals the brand communities hold can either pose a risk or add value to brands.

Once brand managers crystallize banks' brand identities, they should be consistently communicated in all brand touchpoints. However, it may prove cumbersome for managers to build congruent brand identities without a guiding framework. The BI-IC model suggested by the current study aims to provide a framework to guide managers in building cohesive B2B bank brand identities. The BI-IC framework is an internally controlled managerial instrument that incorporates external dimensions to build coherent brand identities for sustained brand differentiation. The proposed framework may help managers to first measure possible brand identity-image gaps objectively. The framework offers insights into how best to analyze external stakeholder's brand interpretation and construal. In instance where gaps are identified, the framework suggests remedial measures to bridge the gaps. The BI-IC framework may also serve as a managerial apparatus to audit and track brand identity coherence over time. The congruence indicator dimensions serve as a confirmation to brand managers that brand identity and image are aligned or not. Even though the suggested framework is conceptual, its dimensionality provides managers with an eclectic range of brand identity-building activities. Hence, we submit that the BI-IC framework may cultivate and enhance bank brands if fully applied.

Furthermore, managers should initially initiate brand identity congruence efforts internally with all employees. This process begins from recruitment and selection of bank employees. Banks need to recruit competent employees who will align themselves with organizational culture to establish employee-employer brand fit and identification. At the same time, banks should also build and project brand identities that attract competent employees. Therefore, bank human resources managers should align job seekers and applicants to organizational values and culture first before competencies. Employee-employer brand fit may yield organizational growth and market share dominance.

Limitations and further research

The limitations of the study are typical of qualitative research. Qualitative research is perceived to be subjective, with its typically small sample sizes. Determining the size of a sample in qualitative research is contextual as it appreciates that some participants' feedback may be richer than others (Bradley 2013; Malhotra 2015; Marshal 1996). This was the case in the current study. Hence the findings cannot be generalized, although they can be extended to similar contexts. Therefore, we recommend further quantitative research on the relevance and applicability of the BIP in other B2B services sectors.

The study's primary contribution (BI-IC framework) is conceptual as it has not been explored in any sector for applicability and credibility. This creates opportunities for future research as the BI-IC framework could be empirically tested in any B2B bank sector. It could also be extended to other B2B services.

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